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Stoszkowski, J., and Collins, D.

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Money, money, money? An investigation of the mediators of talent development in golf

John Stoszkowski and Dave Collins
(University of Central Lancashire)

Abstract

This paper discusses issues surrounding the development of talent in golf; the study utilising qualitative methods to explore some factors that specialist coaches perceived to be critical in the development of young players. Eight golf coaches with significant experience of developing golfers were interviewed to elicit their opinions and perceptions of the most influential mediators in reaching excellence. Following a literature review and outline of field methods a discussion is presented which is based upon data findings. This reveals a significant pressure for young players concerning their financing a pathway through to elite levels. The paper concludes that pure sporting ability may currently not be enough for progression through the sport's lower elite stages - that self promotion skills to acquire sponsorship and learning to cope with the vagaries of luck in terms of life-opportunity may be aspects which the coach and performer should consider in their developmental plan.

Introduction

The attainment of excellence in sports performance is one of the principal aims of National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs), who invest substantial resources in talent development programmes. For example, as part of a Whole Sport Plan for golf, The England Golf Partnership is committed to an investment of over £9,000,000 specifically towards the development of golfing talent over the four year period of 2009-2013 (England Golf, 2009). The predominant aim of such programmes is to identify, train, support, and retain potentially elite performers for an extended period in the hope that eventually some may perform at an elite level (Abbott, Collins, Martindale, and Sowerby, 2002).

Talent, presumed to emanate through a degree of genetic influence, it is often perceived that great athletes are born with a special gift (Phillips, Davids, Renshaw, and Portus, 2010). As a result, according to Howe, Davidson, and Sloboda (1998) many traditional methods of talent identification and development (TID) have been informed by this notion of a relationship between innate ability and elite performance. However, research has suggested that the vast majority of young people who are recruited early by a talent identification process, and then supported

in talent development programmes, do not become successful elite athletes (e.g. Martindale, Collins, and Abraham, 2007; Martindale, Collins, and Daubney, 2005; Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr, and Philippaerts, 2009). In contrast, it has also been posited that many successful elite athletes do not begin as similarly talented youngsters and many did not receive support in institutional support programmes (Martindale *et al.*, 2005). Consequently, there are no universally accepted models of TID but, despite this, relatively little research has investigated the ways elite athletes attain their status in sport (Bailey *et al.*, 2010).

Reflecting this state of affairs, recent expertise literature advocates a move away from talent being perceived as static, with researchers currently emphasising the development rather than the detection and identification of talent (e.g. Abbott, Button, Pepping, and Collins, 2005; Bailey *et al.*, 2010; Martindale *et al.*, 2010). Evidence has suggested that genetic make-up plays a secondary role to that of the environment and numerous authors (e.g. Johnsen, 2003; Reilly, Williams, Nevill, and Franks, 2000; Singer and Janelle, 1999; Tranckle and Cushion, 2006) assert that the process of talent development in sport comprises of a complex, dynamic and multidimensional interaction of intrapersonal, biological, psychological and sociological factors: all of which can change as a performer grows and matures.

In recent years, considerable research evidence has attested to the importance of early diversification and late specialisation in sport (e.g. Côté and Fraser-Thomas, 2008), as well as engagement in appropriate practice regimens (e.g. Ward, Hodges, Williams, and Starkes, 2004). There is also growing evidence to support a range of psychological behaviours, such as, high levels of commitment, coping with pressure, imagery, goal setting, self-belief, as facilitators of an individual's ability to fulfil their potential (Abbott *et al.*, 2005; Gould, Dieffenbach, and Moffett, 2002; MacNamara, Button, and Collins, 2010). Research has also demonstrated that the development and application of these Psychological Characteristics of Developing Excellence (PCDEs) facilitates, and indeed characterises, an individual's ability to transfer successfully between stages of development and cope with the inevitable challenges of the development pathway (MacNamara and Collins, 2009; MacNamara *et al.*, 2008). Simultaneously, a significant body of empirical research has identified a multiplicity of sociological mediators that can impact upon a developing athlete's ability to realise their potential. These include socio-economic background (e.g. Collins and Buller, 2003; Kay, 2003), familial support (e.g. Côté, 1999), coach support (e.g. Martindale *et al.*, 2010), peer relationships (e.g. Holt and Dunn, 2004; Patrick *et al.*, 1999), and birthplace (e.g. Côté, MacDonald, Baker, and Abernethy, 2006).

It is therefore apparent that even genetically gifted athletes may fail to reach expert levels without an environment that is conducive to interactions for the development of skill and the expression of genotypes (Phillips *et al.*, 2010). It must also be noted, that the acquisition of expertise is highly individualised and context specific differences will undeniably exist across talent development domains (Durand-Bush and Salmela, 2002; Martindale *et al.*, 2010), consequently, sport or domain specific research is seemingly required.

Reflecting these various considerations, and the interplay between them as acting on young golfing talent, the current study was designed to add to the literature by exploring the factors which specialist coaches were experienced in. Examination of the developmental experiences of potentially elite young golfers and the talent development systems which serve them should help to reveal the effectiveness of talent development systems in golf and provide evidence based suggestions for programme improvement.

Method

Participants

Data were collected from separate interviews with England Golf County Academy Coaches ($n = 8$) attained through purposeful sampling (Bryman, 2008). All coaches were fully qualified members of the Professional Golfers' Association (Level 3) and had a minimum of 10 years experience of coaching and developing young golfers who subsequently went on to reach elite levels of performance. At the time of the study, County Academy Coaches were required to undergo an open recruitment process for a limited number of paid roles within a County Golf Partnership. This recruitment was based on their perceived ability to develop talented young golfers, and keep a track record of their development. Demographically, all of the coaches were white males of British nationality, the ages of the coaches ranged from 33 to 48 years at the time of data collection. All coaches worked with both male and female golfers, and apart from one, had all represented at high levels of performance as golfers themselves.

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted from the author's institutional ethics committee and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to seek the coaches' perceptions of the challenges to, and facilitators of, the development of elite golfers. Confidentiality was assured and each coach was asked the same open-ended questions; however the order was changed at times depending on the particular direction or flow of the interview. Prompts and probes were used to encourage participants to elaborate on

their responses and provide clear understanding of the meaning of their answers. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, supplemented by a pre-interview briefing and initial conversation to put the participant at his ease. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours of the interview. Each participant was emailed a copy of the transcribed interview and given the opportunity to make any alterations they felt necessary to ensure an accurate representation of their views had been attained. All participants confirmed the accuracy of the information.

Data analysis

Data analysis commenced once all the interviews had been completed and followed the process of inductive analysis as outlined by Martindale *et al.* (2007). In the initial inductive approach, each transcript was subject to a process of line-by-line content analysis (Côté, Salmela, Baria, and Russell, 1993) where individual meaning units were identified from the transcripts. The meaning units were then grouped together into categories which represented their meaning. The number of categories identified was determined by continuous comparing and contrasting of the data until saturation had been achieved and no new categories emerged (Côté *et al.*, 1993). A process of thematic analysis using pattern coding was then used to interrogate and systematically explore the identified categories and group them into a smaller set of themes (Seale, 1999). The categories and themes that emerged from the data are presented in the results section (supported by quotes to exemplify the raw data themes) and are shown in Table 1.

Establishing trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data. The interview schedule was deliberately designed to maximise the depth and breadth of answers and avoid leading participants toward particular findings. Results were sent to each coach for respondent validation (Patton, 2002) to certify the accuracy of the content and ensure congruence with a variety of the underpinning terms and constructs. No changes were required. In line with recommendations by Marshall and Rossman (1999), the researcher also acknowledged their role as a participant in the qualitative research process and recognised the risk of the misclassifying meaning units due to potential biases. Accordingly, following the inductive analysis and in line with recommendations by Stake (2005), results were triangulated with an independent qualitative researcher blind to the objectives of the study with no prior knowledge of the interview schedule or interview data. They were asked to critically examine, question and corroborate the themes identified by the lead researcher as well as code 10 random data quotes into raw themes. This procedure suggested a high degree of congruence as no major disparities between the researchers' views were apparent.

Results

The main themes that emerged after the inductive content analysis and interpretation of the data are outlined in this section (see Table 1). Quotes from the coaches are used throughout to enable the reader to gain an insight of the context in which the themes emerged.

| Category | Theme |
|--|----------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fundamental movement skills • Innate ability | Physical mediators |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early diversification • Late specialisation • Relative age effects • Appropriate golf club • Facilitative competition • Deliberate practice • Individualised development Programme | Features of an effective pathway |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Autonomy/ownership • Goal setting • Motivation | Psychological mediators |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental support • High quality coaching • Peer support • Phases of progression • Finance | Sociological mediators |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Luck | Luck |

Table 1 – Emerging categories and themes

Perceived features of an effective development pathway

An oft-stated perception of the coaches was the need for individualisation of the development process to allow for fluctuations in development depending on an individual's specific needs, for example:

It's flexible [the player's development]...you have to teach or treat them all as individual human beings...there's more than one way to skin a cat and I think people look for formulas too much.

A golfer's physical capabilities were emphasised as determinants of successful talent development and precursors to excellence in golf. However, data analysis also showed that all 8 coaches perceived a golfer's physical ability to be innate or genetically determined, with the suggestion that a player's genetic make-up may constrain or pre-determine the level they may eventually reach, for example:

You've got to have a sporting ability...you can turn a donkey into a fast donkey but you can't turn it into a race horse...Some kids have got it [sporting ability] and some kids haven't.

Despite suggesting that physical capabilities are to some extent 'god given', perhaps contradictorily 6 coaches also reported that many of the fundamental movement skills identified were in fact a result of a golfer's early diversification in a variety of sports before specialisation in golf. Although all 8 coaches seemed to disregard the need for early specialisation in golf, there was no consensus on the exact age a player should specialise. Instead, relatively broad age ranges were suggested in order to allow talented golfers to take full advantage of opportunities on offer within the player pathway, for example:

If you start [golf] between the ages of 9-13, there is no reason why you can't have a career in the game.

Encouragingly all 8 coaches also reported an awareness of the effects that maturation could have on the perceived physical capabilities of a developing golfer, and were aware of the potential implications of such scenarios:

If you go on performance...you're then down to the more physically developed kids...which is not the ideal thing for younger players developing. That's how they get missed in the system.

The coaches in this study all emphasised that appropriate practice was extremely important for sustaining successful development. However, the coaches also stressed the role of engaging in practice activities deliberately designed to improve performance rather than experience within the domain, for example:

You see so many guys [playing golf]...who are quite talented but they practice in completely the wrong way...deliberate practice is massive...anything from practice has got to have a result...creating practice situations that creates and puts pressure on them is key.

Access to appropriate levels of competition (based on the golfer's individual stage of development) was also identified as a vital component of the talent development environment, although the potential negative impact of debilitating competition was highlighted:

They need to play at levels that they are comfortable with...not playing too big a tournament when they are not ready for it.

Perceived psychological mediators of talent development in golf

For a long-term development agenda to be successful, all 8 coaches reported that the developing golfer needed to become autonomous and take increasing ownership and responsibility for their own development, rather than becoming dependent on their coach and/or others:

They've got to take charge of it [their development]...continually question yourself why, what am I doing this for...That comes from educating them early doors so they are not relying on a coach or a psychologist [for direction].

To facilitate this process, coaches stressed that a systematic process of goal-setting and reviewing of progress was essential to promote change and facilitate development. The coaches suggested that a learning goal orientation (i.e. a focus on mastery and improving ability) is more desirable than the setting of performance goals (i.e. a focus on winning and proving ability) to facilitate effective athlete development in golf:

There is a huge role for the coach to say hang on a second this [goal] is tangible, 1 mile an hour onto your swing speed every 3 months and you'll get there by the time you're 20.

The whole sample also implied that a developing golfer's capacity for taking control and ownership of their own development was, to some extent, linked to their motivation for developing themselves as a golfer. Coaches also used words and phrases such as 'commitment', 'desire', 'work ethic', and 'single mindedness' to describe what was essentially the persistence of a player in continuing their participation and striving for excellence in golf. Data in the current study did not explicitly refer to specific types of motivation; coaches did however tend to discuss the concept in terms of 'the self', that is, motivation emanating from within the golfer:

Self motivation...how much they want it [excellence], a bit of selfishness, single mindedness...that's what I want to do and I'm doing it regardless of all the obstacles that come up...They want it enough.

The coaches in this study all emphasised the importance of a developing golfer being able to negotiate critical stages or transitions during their development. These transitions included both sporting and non-sporting factors with coaches perceiving psychosocial factors as creating the biggest potential transition:

Outside influences from sort of 14-18...there is just so much that can go on in their lives socially at that age it's a big factor...boyfriends/girlfriends, alcohol, all those kinds of things, the trappings of life if you like.

Perceived sociological mediators of talent development in golf

Data analysis identified socio-contextual factors as prominent mediators of development on the pathway toward elite levels in golf. All 8 coaches identified a golf club that encouraged and facilitated junior golf as an essential environmental component for developing talent:

The venue that they play at is very important...the golf club itself ideally should support juniors to make it an ideal environment [for developing talent]...they should have a junior section, the more juniors the better.

All 8 coaches suggested that the development of talent in golf is very much dependent on the support offered by the family and in particular, parents, who play a crucial facilitative role. However, the data also revealed that negative parent behaviours can inhibit development of the player. This was most notably in the form of parents being overly 'pushy' as well as exerting an excessive controlling influence over the child's participation, often due to a misunderstanding of the requirements of effective development, for example:

Parental support is extremely important...support and not being pushed that's key...they've got to support it [the player's development] but on the other hand they can't be too pushy and force the child into things that they don't want to do.

The current findings also emphasise the importance of a developing golfer having access to high quality coaching. Rather than simply offering technical guidance however, the results suggest the coach (or coaches) of a developing golfer must simultaneously act as a mentor, providing advice, support, and guidance to them. The role of the coach was also described as being holistic in nature:

The coach who's working with them who's gonna [*sic*] be supportive...act almost as a mentor in a holistic way...It's not just technique its advice...a good coach in terms of junior development has knowledge, not just about the golf swing...but about the ups and downs that they go through throughout their development.

The data also revealed that, as a golfer develops, it is common for them to access an increased number of coaches. For example, they may have input from a club coach, up to three county coaches and several national coaches. The importance of communication between those coaches was identified as being a crucial factor in the successful development of the golfer, for example:

There are too many egos involved [in golf coaching]...there needs to be more cooperation between coaches...some of the players themselves can get a bit confused by going to 2 or 3 different coaches...those lines of communication [between coaches] I think are really important for that.

The current findings suggest that during the development of competence in golf, a player's golfing peers are likely to exert a powerful and important influence on development:

The people they play with are massively influential...you could get the same kid that falls into a group of other lads who are all really motivated and want to get good...they almost get swept away with that momentum.

It was clear from the narrative from all the coaches that access to appropriate financial support is a critical mediator in a developing golfer's progression, especially as a player approaches an elite level, and may even limit the timescale a developing golfer has to progress:

They need a lot of cash to keep going...If their development is taking longer then they absolutely need that cash to keep on doing it [training and competing]...it's a massive block...just the actual cash side...to be competitive you've got to be full-time...you haven't got time to work.

A final theme which emerged from the data was a clear recognition of the significant role that luck plays in the development of talent. This was especially evident within the data in terms of a developing player being "lucky" enough to have access to the appropriate financial resources to support their development, for example:

There is no doubt in my mind that there is some luck involved as in being in the right place at the right time, there are a lot of talented players out there that have not been in the right place at the right time.

Discussion

Despite the interview guide being deliberately designed to be vague and avoid leading coaches toward particular findings, the themes that emerged in this study provide confirmatory support for many of the physical, environmental, psychological and sociological factors identified in previous research as impacting upon the development of talent in sport (e.g. Abbott and Collins, 2002; Abbott *et al.*, 2002; Bailey *et al.*, 2010; Martindale *et al.*, 2010). Encouragingly, it would therefore appear that the coaches in this study were aware of, and structured their thoughts against, the multi-dimensional nature of talent development in golf and the multiple pathways through which potential can be realised. It was interesting to note that the coaches seemed *au fait* with many of the constructs and categories that permeate the existing literature in the field. The researcher purposely refrained from referring to any of the common terminology in the field, yet the coaches consistently introduced several pertinent terms (e.g. deliberate practice) into the conversation. Therefore, even if this was done serendipitously, on a surface level at least it appeared the coaches were well informed on the factors that impact upon the development of

talent in golf. Consequently, it would be useful to further investigate these findings in order to determine how closely the coaches' perceptions of what factors are important mirror what they actually deliver and value in practice; the extent to which they 'walk the talk'.

Despite the congruence of these findings with existing literature, and the apparent absence of additional factors unique to golf emerging as determinants of development, results suggest that some developmental influences may need to be considered in contrast to the uniform picture that has emerged from research on talent development in other sports. This was most notable in relation to the importance of socio-economic status and financial support for a developing golfer, especially as they approached the elite level. Although research (e.g. Kay, 2000) suggests appropriate financial support is necessary for developing athletes in all sports, the biggest single factor articulated by all coaches as potentially differentiating between those that achieve at the elite level in golf and those who fail to do so, was that of access to substantial levels of financial support.

This perception was also consistently linked to, and discussed as interacting with, several other themes that emerged from the data. For example, coaches often alluded to a perception that, to have a realistic chance of performing well in prominent amateur tournaments (and as a result increase the likelihood of being 'noticed' by regional and national selectors), elite amateur players must become 'full-time' golfers in order to have sufficient time to play and train. Thus, a major consequence of this scenario was the perception that those players do not have time to maintain employment due to these training demands. In addition, due to the rules of amateur status in golf (The R&A, 2007) an amateur golfer plays on a non-remunerative basis, meaning they cannot derive an income from playing golf until they become professional. Essentially, coaches therefore perceived elite amateur golf to consist almost entirely of financial outgoings with minimal, if any, income to fund their participation.

Consequently, if these perceptions of the coaches are representative of reality, this finding has potentially crucial implications for talent development programmes in golf. If appropriate financial resources are unavailable a developing player will be disadvantaged compared to individuals with access to appropriate financial resources. It can therefore be assumed that developing golfers from higher socio-economic status backgrounds are likely to have more opportunity, time, and support to progress in golf (Bailey *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, Rowley and Graham (1999) concluded that individuals from low-income backgrounds are more likely to drop out of sport due to the time and monetary cost of intensive training whilst other studies have linked income and social class with sports participation (e.g. Hylton

and Totten, 2001; Kirk *et al.*, 1997). Since a key aim of TID programmes in golf is to provide the most appropriate learning environment to allow an individual to excel, programmes must ensure they provide widespread opportunity. It is important that the sociological factors identified in the current research (e.g. financial support) are not overlooked to allow talent development programmes to become less discriminatory toward potentially talented participants from low-socio economic backgrounds.

Correspondingly, when a developing golfer does not have access to sufficient financial resources, coaches also described the search for, and acquisition of, sponsorship as a key to supporting a golfers' progression. However, time spent away from golf specific activity to locate and secure additional funds was also perceived to have a debilitating effect on development due to the time pressures already discussed. For that reason, instead of merely focusing on improving golfing ability, a key consideration for TID programme designers in golf may be to help players acquire the soft skills that could help them negotiate the development process more smoothly. For example, those players that do need to locate additional sponsorship to fund their development may benefit from training to help make themselves more marketable to potential sponsors or access other external sources of funding i.e. scholarship opportunities.

Also evident from these results was the perception that financial support is often a consequence of luck. Indeed, many of the mediating factors associated with talent development in golf that have been identified were perceived to be somewhat beyond the control of the developing golfer. This finding also supports previous research (e.g. Bailey, 2007; Bailey and Ross, 2009) that emphasises how, irrespective of their ability in sport, a child has no choice on whether they are born in the right place, with the right parents, at the right time. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a high number of potentially talented golfers may be 'unlucky' to be born and brought up in non-supportive backgrounds, which are not conducive to the provision of opportunities to fulfil their potential (Bailey and Toms, 2010).

It must be noted that there are limitations inherent within the current study which must be considered alongside the results that emerged. A relatively small number of coaches were interviewed ($n = 8$) who described and outlined each of the factors in slightly different ways and to differing extents. The views expressed were their individual perceptions of the talent development process in golf. However, even though the factors outlined were perceived by the coaches to be important, the very fact each member of the sample was actively employed within talent development in golf would raise questions to their suitability if the factors identified were not important in practice. Accordingly, triangulation of the information with other

important groups in the development process (e.g. parents and players) would strengthen our understanding of the requirements for effective TID in golf. This understanding would also be reinforced by undertaking longitudinal research in golf over the course of several players' development in order to help identify the factors that differentiate between those that achieve at the elite level and those who fail to do so.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the major finding from this study appears to be that those involved in the development of aspiring golfers should not only be concerned with developing golfing ability, but should also place emphasis on the removal of the socio-contextual barriers that act as significant barriers to development in golf, namely access to appropriate financial resources and the neutralisation of luck. Further investigation is needed, however, to determine the extent to which the perception of achievement of excellence in golf is largely determined by financial mediators is indeed the case in actuality.

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2. *Author profile:* John Stoszkowski is a lecturer in Sports Development and Coaching at the University of Central Lancashire. He has a background in golf as a player as well as Regional Development Officer for the English Golf Union and Regional Coaching Development Manager for the Professional Golfers' Association. John is currently working towards his PhD under the supervision of Professor Dave Collins.
3. *Dear reader,* if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: John Stoszkowski JRStoszkowski@uclan.ac.uk and Dave Collins DJCollins@uclan.ac.uk. The full MPhil thesis upon which this paper is based can be viewed at: <http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/2998/>.

Reviewer's comments:

This is an interesting paper which seems unwilling to escape from its heritage of being an MPhil research submission identified in the acknowledgement above. This is no bad thing it having some pros and cons for the reader depending upon their interests – it does not necessarily detract from the quality of its findings and emerging discussion. The paper reveals an honest academic endeavour to follow a protocol in qualitative research and to present it in a standard research format. Thus, a good working knowledge of qualitative research tools are evidenced, but, the structure of the paper leaves the methods somewhat dislocated from the golfing story that emerges. Thus, there seems to have been scope for integrating the contextual discoveries in the data as a progressive and developmental explanation of field methods. Might what was discovered in the field be used to explain the research methods find it? There is a good depth of literature offered to rummage behind the problems of talent identification and actual achievement. From this theoretical grounding an interesting discussion on the affects of money, opportunity, luck and success in golf emerge. In closing the author indicates that eight transcripts may have been insufficient in some way and I remain to be convinced that he may seek security from numbers! I would also question the intent to neutralise luck in the development of elite golfers. I am sure good fortune would be welcomed whenever it appeared, like the occasional hole-in-one. If a hole-in-one were scored would it be declined or rejected for stemming luck? This has been an interesting paper which has obviously made me think and I would recommend it to others for surely having the same effect on them.